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ABSTRACT

Personal interviews with teachers, administrators, and counselors in grades 1-6 at two elementary schools in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) examined their attitudes toward two sets of DCPS guidelines governing student promotion and retention. One set of guidelines was in use before 1976, the other afterwards. Questionnaires preceding the interviews gathered data on respondents' personal characteristics and occupational background. The interviews yielded data on the educators' problems with both the old and new guidelines. Five findings were derived from these data, regarding lack of clarity in both sets of guidelines, absence of implementation materials (such as tests), teacher addition of promotion criteria not in the guidelines, variation in guideline interpretation according to teacher education and years on the job, and need for improved guidelines. Based on these findings and also on problems with the new guidelines identified by the interviewees, four recommendations are made involving pilot-testing of new policies, teacher and administrator input into policy-making, programs for students with very high or low mastery of skills, and incremental, grade-by-grade implementation of new promotion policies. Copies of the interview schedules and questionnaires are appended to the document. (RW)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF TEACHERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' DECISION-MAKING BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES CONCERNING THE PROMOTION AND RETENTION OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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Washington, D. C. Howard University Teacher Corps Program '78

Paper presented at annual meeting of American Educational Research Association; New York, New York; March 19-23, 1982.

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INTRODUCTION

In all levels of education, promotion and non-promotion of students represents a difficult decision. The factors which influence this decision and teachers' attitudes about grade promotion vary. The District of Columbia Board of Education Policy Standards (1967) on promotion versus non-promotion place emphasis on achievement and other factors. Among these other factors are:

1. The chronological age of the student; for example, students who are 13.7 years old by sixth grade are automatically promoted to the seventh grade whether or not they have mastered sixth grade reading and math skills;
2. Mental ability; students assessed as low in mental capacity are promoted automatically because it is felt that repeating a grade will not help them master specific skills for their grade level;
3. Availability of special services to aid the failing students--not all schools have the same amount of special services (e.g., counselor, reading and math specialists, social worker and psychologists); and
4. Physical maturity and/or social and emotional adjustment problems affecting the non-promoted student which are circumstances which the student has no control.

Decision to promote or retain are based on guidelines developed and circulated by the school administration. These guidelines are then implemented in the classroom according to the teacher's interpretation of them.

However, since 1976 the District of Columbia has implemented a Competency Based Curriculum in all schools. The utilization of such a curriculum has led an increasing number of schools to implement non-graded classrooms and an approach to a system of continuous progress.

With the changes in the traditional classroom structure from the Competency Based Curriculum, new guidelines and criteria were established for promotion and retention of students. The Student Progress Plan (1980) guidelines established are:

1. Each student should be permitted to move along the instructional continuum at his/her individual rate.
2. The procedure stresses mastery of defined skills as the student progresses.
3. Documentation as to the progress of students relative to promotion/retention should be established.

Since policies and procedures are subject to individual interpretation, it is important to determine how teachers in the schools have operationally defined them. An investigation of the new guidelines, teachers' commitment to, and implementation of them may provide a basis of consistent practices understood and endorsed by all parties involved.

Today, I would like to present the teachers' and administrator's attitudes toward the former traditional and the Student Progress Plan policies and criteria currently being implemented in the Washington, D. C. Public Schools. From an

analysis of these attitudes, recommendations for improvement in the policy will also be presented.

This investigation used a qualitative/quantitative (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975) case study approach in evaluating and interpreting teachers' and administrators' attitudes towards the policies and criteria.

Thus, the ultimate goal of this study was to make education place a meaningful emphasis upon a child's development by uniformly establishing realistic guidelines and procedures for promotion and retention which teachers and administrators can effectively implement.

This study focused on first through sixth grade teachers, administrators and counselors at two District of Columbia elementary schools. Even though this study focused on a small sample, which cannot be generalized to all schools, it provided substantial information relevant to situations similar to those in the schools studied (Guba, 1978).

TEACHERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

In order to investigate the administrators' and teachers' attitudes towards the guidelines and criteria An Investigator's Interview Guide was utilized and a semi-structured face-to-face interview was developed. The interview form consisted of both open and closed items. Forty-five items were included in the form. The questions were designed using an ethnographic approach (Spradley, 1979).

The variables associated with teachers' and administrators' attitudes toward the previously stated guidelines and criteria are:

(a) attitudes toward designated policies (strengths and weaknesses); and
(b) preception about needed changes.

All subjects were aware of some aspects of the traditional policy even though the subjects stated several different combinations of the guidelines and criteria. The attitudes of the subjects towards the traditional policy varied from continuing with the traditional policy to implementing a new policy and guidelines.

Responses from the interviews concerning the traditional policy included:

1. Decisions concerning promotion and retention should be solely made by the teachers using whatever instruments that are needed.
2. Additional specifically defined remediation and/or vocational programs for students who cannot and/or have difficulty mastering reading and math should be designed.
3. Decisions concerning promotion and retention should solely be determined by the District of Columbia Public Schools with clearer guidelines for implementation.

Even though the subjects stated that there were problems with the new Student Progress Plan in understanding and implementing the policy and criteria, the subjects felt that they were needed.

The following problems were identified by all subjects in regard to the Student Progress Plan.

1. Not sure how to implement in the classroom.
2. Too much recordkeeping.
3. Additional support personnel is needed to assist in the teaching of reading and math.
4. All guidelines should be in place before actual implementation.
5. New report cards should be designed to fit along with the guidelines.

6. Additional staff development should be given to explain the guidelines.

The problems identified were then used the researcher to make recommendations for improvement of the policy concerning promotion and retention and its implementation in the classroom. Other problems identified which were not as significant as those previously stated, but which have an impact on the policy in general were:

1. The critical skills checklist for mastery of skills is too long.
2. Guidelines for exceptions should be established.
3. More parental involvement is needed.
4. Guidelines are left open for individual interpretations.
5. Some form of monitoring is needed to ensure that all persons are implementing the guidelines the same way.
6. More teacher and administrator input should have been requested before the implementation.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

From the examination of documents and information gathered from the Investigator's Interview Guide, the following findings are summarized:

1. The documents concerning promotion and retention in the Traditional and Student Progress Plan lacked clarity. This caused teachers and administrators to interpret the guidelines and criteria to fit their needs.
2. Teachers stated that they were not confident in their understanding of the implementation process

because essential materials (e.g., time schedules, System-wide Interim tests, and commerically developed tests) were not completed when the Plan was implemented.

3. Teachers added additional criteria to the Student Progress Plan because they felt that the new criteria were not well-defined.

4. The interpretation and implementation of the criteria for the Student Progess Plan is influenced by teacher variables. The longer the teacher remains on the job and the higher the education, the less importance given to tests and more to student willingness to learn and classroom attendance.

5. With the exception of two teachers, the other subjects agreed that the traditional policy was problematic and a new policy for promotion and retention was needed. However, there are problems with understanding and implementing the Student Progess Plan.

The findings of this study support the original premises, that guidelines and policies must be clearly defined and rational in order for them to be properly and fully implemented.

One of the purposes of this study was to make recommendations and formulate suggestions for further research.

The following recommendations should be considered for improvement of the policy.

1. Prior to the final approval of policy that involves implementation by such a large number of personnel, the policy and procedures should be tested in a pilot study. This study would include at least ten percent of the District of Columbia Public

Elementary Schools. At this time, teachers and administrators involved in the study can make recommendations in the areas of the policy that are not feasible.

2. There should be more input from the implementors to determine (a) whether or not policy changes are needed and (b) if so, establish a policy which is feasible and realistic. In order for this to be accomplished, teachers and administrators should be surveyed as to their knowledge of the policy and what is felt to be a practical method for determining promotion and retention of students. The responses from the survey can then be used to begin to construct a policy that accomplishes what it set out to do.

3. Policy involving promotion and retention should provide a program for the following students who (a) continuously demonstrate non-mastery of skills and (b) continuously demonstrate mastery of skills far above their peers. Students who are continuously at the end of each spectrum should be provided with either a remediation program or a program designed to assist students who are academically talented.

4. In a policy that effects all elementary students, the policy should be implemented incrementally beginning with the first grade during its first year of implementation. Thus, each new first grade will be involved along with the preceeding grade. This would alleviate such a large number of students

being retained and would provide an equable amount of resources and specialists to address the needs of this student.

Once a policy and its guidelines have been tested and approved for implementation in the classroom procedures should be established and monitored to ensure that the policy is fully and accurately implemented.

CONCLUSIONS

In assessing the general outcomes of the present study one must realize the fact that teachers and administrators will continue to have their own perceptions and attitudes towards policy as long as the policy is vague and unclear. These problems will lead to individual interpretation of the policy.

The findings summarized have important implications for further research. The findings indicated that the subjects need clear and well-defined guidelines and criteria in order to implement more effectively a promotion and retention policy.

According to Clark and Yinger (1979) the decision-making that teachers exercise follows from interpretations of their experiences. Thus, the teacher defines things as the elements of the classroom situation that are most important, the relationships among them, and the order in which they should be considered. This validates the data obtained from the subjects in this study. Since the District of Columbia Public Schools gave no rank order importance of the criteria in the Student Progress Plann, the teachers established their own and gave addtional criteria to meet their needs, Therefore, if teachers are not given specific guidelines and criteria to be implemented in the classroom, they will draw upon their experiences to establish a policy that they feel comfortable with.

During the first year of implementation of the Student Progress Plan, there was indecisiveness about the merits of the

Plan by the Central Administration (Washington Post, 1981). This also lead to additional confusion among the teachers and administrators as to the implementation and validity of such a program.

Since Moorish (1976) recognizes the teacher's ability to block implementation of innovations, the researcher suggests that the findings and statements made by the subjects of the study be considered in formulating policy that will be implemented directly by them.

APPENDIX

No. _____

PERSONAL/BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

TEACHERS

General Information: To be filled out at least two days prior to the interview by teachers.

Grade Level Taught: _____

Age: 20-30 _____
31-40 _____
over 40 _____

Number of years taught in D.C.P.S. _____

Number of years at this school _____

Number of years taught outside of D.C.P.S. _____
Where _____

Amount of education: (in which area)

B.A. or B.S. _____

Masters _____

Masters plus _____

Other _____

Date and number of workshops and/or courses involving:

	Number	Date
Constructing Tests	_____	_____
Continuous Progress	_____	_____
Individualized Instruction	_____	_____
Competency Based Curriculum	_____	_____

Number of Students:	Retained	Promoted
1978-79	_____	_____
1979-80	_____	_____

No. _____

PERSONAL/BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

TEACHERS

General Inforamtion: To be filled out at least two days prior to the interview by the teachers.

Grade Level Taught: _____

Age: 20-30 _____

31-40 _____

over 40 _____

Number of years taught in D.C.P.S. _____

Number of years at this school _____

Number of years taught outside of D.C.P.S. _____
Where _____

Amount of education: (in which area)

B.A. or B.S. _____

Masters _____

Masters plus _____

Other _____

Date and number of workshops and/or courses involving:

	Number	Date
Constructing Tests	_____	_____
Continuous Progress	_____	_____
Individualized Instruction	_____	_____
Competency Based Curriculum	_____	_____

Number of Students:	Non-mastery	Mastery
1978-79	_____	_____
1979-80	_____	_____

No. _____

PERSONAL/BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

ADMINISTRATORS/COUNSELORS

General Information: To be filled out at least two days prior to the interview by the administrators and counselors.

Position: _____ Sex: _____

Age: 20-30 _____

31-40 _____

over 40 _____

Number of years in position: _____

Number of years of D.C.P.S. teaching experience _____

Number of years taught outside of D.C.P.S. _____ Where _____

Amount of education: (in which area)

B.A. or B.S. _____

Masters _____

Masters plus _____

Other _____

Date and number of workshops and/or courses involving:

	Number	Date
Constructing Tests	_____	_____
Continuous Progress	_____	_____
Individualized Instruction	_____	_____
Competency Based Curriculum	_____	_____

Please list any of the above workshops and/or courses in which you were the instructor _____

_____ _____

No. _____

INVESTIGATOR'S INTERVIEW GUIDE #1

General Information

To be used with the teachers who are using the traditional promotion and retention guidelines.
(Investigators-introduction of self, statement of purpose of the interview, finding of some common interest with the individual to initiate conversation):

Descriptive questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour Questions — I see you have taught for _____ years. Have you always taught _____ grade?

Monitor Question — Do you prefer this grade? _____

What grades do you prefer? _____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structional Questions: (Spradley)

What guidelines do you use in retaining a student?_____

_____

Do you have a copy of these guidelines?_____

If not, how did you find out about them?_____

_____

Are any of these criteria more important than other? _____

If so, which ones? _____

_____

Do these same criteria affect your decision in promoting students? _____If not, what are they? _____

_____

Do you feel there should be a change made in promotion policies? _____ Why or why not? _____

_____

If a change is made in the promotion policies, what do you think should be included? _____

_____

The District school system is beginning to implement a new policy. How do you feel about it?_____

_____

Has your administrator made you aware of the new policy?____

If so, how? _____

Do you feel this has been adequate? _____

If not, what else do you feel is needed? _____

_____

No. _____

INVESTIGATOR'S INTERVIEW GUIDE #2

General Information

Traditional Policy

(Investigator-reintroduction of self, restatement of purpose of interview, finding of some common interest of individual to initiate conversation):

Descriptive Questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour Question

I see you have retained _____ students during the past two years, (or I see you have not retained any students over the past two years). Why? ____

_____

Monitor Question

What criteria did you use to retain or promote students? _____

_____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structural Questions: (Spradley)

Having become familiar with the new criteria involving continuous progress, which ones do you feel are most important?

_____

_____

Now rank them according to importance and state why? _____

_____

_____

Are there any that you feel are not relevant to the policy?

_____ If so, which ones? _____

_____

Would you add any other criteria to the policy? _____

If so, what? _____

_____

No. _____

INVESTIGATOR'S INTERVIEW GUIDE #1a

General Information

To be used with the teachers who are using the continuous progress guidelines. (Investigator-introduction of self, statement of purpose of interview, finding of some common interest of individual to initiate conversation):

Descriptive Questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour Question	I see you have taught for _____ years.
	Have you always taught _____ grades?
Monitor Question	Do you prefer this grade? _____
	What grades do you prefer? _____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structural Questions: (Spradley)

Would you explain the guidelines that you use in your continuous progress program? _____

_____

Do you feel that any of these criteria are more important than the other? _____ If so, which ones? _____

_____

Do you feel there should be any changes or adjustments in this policy? _____ Why or why not? _____

_____

The District school system is beginning to implement a new policy, which was designed after the guidelines that you use now. How do you feel about that? _____

_____

Has your administrator made you aware of the new policy changes? _____ If so, how? _____

_____

Do you feel this has been adequeate? _____ If not, what else do you feel is needed? _____

_____

_____

No. _____

INVESTIGATOR'S INTERVIEW GUIDE #2a

General Information

Continuous Progress

(Investigator-reintroduction of self, restatement of purpose of interview, finding of some common interest of individual to initiate conversation):

Descriptive Questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour Question: I see you had _____ students who were unable to master skills over the past two years (or I see all your students mastered their skills over the past two years)? Why? _____

_____

Monitor Question: Were the continuous progress guidelines helpful to you im making your decisions about each child? _____

_____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structural Questions: (Spradley)

Having become familiar with the new criteria involving continuous progress, which ones do you feel are most important? ____

_____

Now rank them according to importance and state why? _____

_____

_____

Having participated in the beginning with the continuous progress policy, are there any criteria in the new guidelines that you feel are not relevant to the policy? _____ If so, which ones? _____

_____

Would you add any other criteria to the policy? _____ If so, what? _____

_____

)No. _____

INVESTIGATOR'S INTERVIEW GUIDE #1b

General Information

To be used with the administrators and counselors. (Investigator-introduction of self, statement of purpose of interview, finding of some common interest of individual to initiate conversation.)

Descriptive Questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour Question: I see you have been a _____ (position) for _____ years.

Monitor Questions: Do you prefer this position? _____

If no, what do you like best? _____

_____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structural Questions: (Spradley)

What guidelines do you use in helping a teacher make a decision about retaining a student (or identifying student mastery?) ___

_____

_____

Do you have a copy of these guidelines? _____

If not, how did you find out about them? _____

_____

Are any of these criteria more important than the other? _____

If so, which ones? _____

Do these same criteria affect your decision in promoting students (or student mastery)? _____ If not, what are they?

_____

_____

Do you feel there should be a change in the policy that you are using? _____ Why or why not? _____

_____

If changes are made, what do you think should be included?

_____

_____

The District school system is beginning to make changes in implementing a new policy. How do you feel about it? _____

_____

Have you been made aware of the new changes? _____

If so, who informed you and how? _____

_____

Do you feel this has been adequate ? _____

If not, what else do you feel is needed? _____

_____

Have you made your faculty aware of the changes? _____

If so, how? _____

If not, why? _____

No. _____

INVESTIGATOR'S INTERVIEW GUIDE #2b

General Inforamtion

Administrators/Counselors

(Investigator-reintroduction of self, restatement of purpose of interview, finding some common interest of individual to initiate conversation).

Descriptive Questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour Question — I see that your school has been using the _____ (traditional/continuous progress) guidelines. How has it worked? _____

_____

Monitor Question — What information was given to teachers to help them carry out the guidelines?

_____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structural Questions: (Spradley)

Having become familiar with the new guidelines which ones do you feel are most important? _____

Now rank them according to importance and state why? _____

_____

Are there any that you feel are not relevant to the policy?

_____ If so, which ones? _____

_____

Would you add any other criteria to the policy? _____

If so, what? _____

_____

No. _____

INVESTIGATOR's INTERVIEW GUIDE #3

General Information

Final interview to be utilized with all teachers, administrators and counselors participating in the study.

(Investigator-reintroduction of self, restatement of purpose of interview, finding of some common interest of individual to initiate conversation.)

Descriptive Questions: (Spradley)

Grand Tour — I see you have attended _____ workshops. Which one did you feel was most helpful? _____

Monitor Question — Was this workshop helpful to you in better implementing the new promotion and retention policy? _____ If not, why? _____

What could have helped you better? _____

_____

Descriptive Questions (cont.) Structural Questions: (Spradley)

In making a decision about a child, the policy would like for teachers to use teacher-made tests. How do you feel about that? _____

_____

Which do you feel are more reliable, teacher-made tests or tests used by the District? (PRT, PMT, CTBS) _____

_____ Why? _____

_____

Do you construct your own test? _____

If not, why? _____

If yes, where did you learn how to do this? _____

_____

Earlier, you told me a list of criteria that you use in retaining a student. Would you now rank them for me? (Have individual select from choices on card # ____) Note: Selection will come from Investigator's Interview Guide #1 and #2. Now, I have another list of criteria that could be possibly used in making a decision about retaining a student. Would you rank these in order of importance? (Criteria are from list used in the new policy.) (Have individual select from choices on card # _____.)

_____ 1. Formal tests (PRT, PMT, CTBS)

_____ 2. Informal tests (teacher-made)

_____ 3. CBC assessment tasks

_____ 4. Classroom participation

_____ 5. Classroom attendance

CONCLUSION

We have talked on two separate occasions about retention and promotion of students. Do you have any comments or suggestions in how the new policy should be implemented? _____

_____

Anything else you would like to talk about? _____

Any questions you want to ask me? _____

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